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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: *review_editor@platypus1917.org*. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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The Black Panther Party and community organizing

An interview with Bobby Seale

Audrey Crescenti

The following is an edited transcript of an interview with Bobby Seale on July 9th, 2018 at Platypus UC Berkeley's New Left reading group. Bobby Seale cofounded the Black Panther Party with Huey Newton in 1966.

Audrey Crescenti: In preparation for our summer reading group on the 1960s–70s New Left, we read *The Movement Magazine*'s jail interview with Huey Newton in 1968, in which Newton distinguished between "Cultural Nationalism" and what he called "Revolutionary Nationalism."[1] Could you elaborate on that distinction?

Bobby Seale: That was the thing about Cultural Nationalism. My argument in opposition to Cultural Nationalism was: You are dealing with an aesthetic. So, my argument with the cultural nationalists... [*doing an impression of them*]: "Yeah, but one day when we're liberated, I'm gonna be riding down the Niger River, floating down...." I said, "No, you ain't. Because Kwame Nkrumah is gonna tell you to get your ass out of there — this is a dam system to generate electricity to build a goddamn empire!"[2] See, I was more interested in the mineral resources in the bowels of the earth of Africa.

My whole argument, I'm talking about before the party started. When the Southern Katanga province was in an uproar in Congo, about one third of the world's copper ore was coming out of the Southern Katanga province in the heart of Africa. This research led me to bauxite! Kwame Nkrumah's bauxite plant. In all my tech-schools, etc., I was an honest student, at the head of the class. I had a 7-skill level in structural repair and high-performance aircraft.[3] I knew what bauxite was about, the ore. So later in life, when I am getting ready to start some black history classes, I said, "Bauxite!" And somebody says, "What the hell is wrong with you?" I say, "He's got a goddamn mountain of bauxite. He's got bauxite all over Western Africa." They said, "What the hell is bauxite?" I said, "The basic goddamn ore for all aluminum products in the goddamn world! Africa should be filthy rich economically." That was where I was coming from.

AC: That is similar to Malcolm X in the piece that we read this week, "I Don't Mean Bananas."[4] He puts it this way: "You guys are too concerned with having coffee with a cracker" — talking about desegregation. What we should be focusing on, he says — the real battle — is actually taking ownership of this incredible bounty of natural resources in Africa, forming alliances with people in Africa, and not just identifying as Americans.

BS: Yeah, I understood that too. That was where I was coming from, even in supporting Malcolm. I was glad he left the Nation of Islam. Because I did not care for that little doctrinaire crap. When you were coming to my Political Education class, I was teaching you dialectics, you know what I mean? Huey never knew how to do it. But I understood it. I understood it from a mathematical standpoint, okay? One of the main dialectical principles that retail and produce services and goods?" "But that is patchwork Socialism!" I said, "Patchwork my ass. That's necessary. That is the foundation of whatever kind of Socialism you're going to have. If you don't have real people's community control, you're not going to have any real Socialism." To me, Socialism is about evolving a system and an economic practice of fair-shares equality and fair-shares access. It's from the grass-roots up. Not some pig pile structure down.

AC: There was a tendency with later black-nationalist groups to be explicitly separatist and to have no faith whatsoever in white workers — for instance, what happened after the fallout of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.[5]

BS: Yeah, that was Stokely Carmichael. That was why I kicked him out of my organization. He went abroad and said we are going to get rid of all these white mothercountry radicals that Eldridge Cleaver is talking about. I went abroad, and they showed me this tape. I said, "Who's this motherfucker talking about fucking up my coalition?"

AC: Huey Newton was very clear about not seeing white workers — "white radicals" he called them — as hopeless. Whereas Carmichael ultimately thought that skin color determines your tribe, and you cannot go against your tribe. If you conflate whiteness with Capitalism, then white people can never be truly revolutionary.

BS: Bullshit. He was falling into that trap with that old Nation of Islam separatism shit. That was his problem. When I got back from my tour in Scandinavia, I said, "We've got to get Stokely to resign from this organization." By this time, Eldridge Cleaver was not in the country anymore, and I communicated to him through whatever framework: "That Stokely's got to go." Little did I know that Castro was getting ready to kick Eldridge Cleaver out of Cuba because Bill Brent had hijacked a plane and took it down there. Well, I kicked Bill Brent out of my organization because of a cheap robbery of $42 from the Black Panther Party newspaper distribution truck. While Crutch [Brent's partner] was in the restroom, he robs them for $42. They had been distributing newspapers all night — circulating 50,000 newspapers in the San Francisco and Oakland Bay area. We really rose to that point. Plus, we had another 100,000 going across the country. I had a big organization. It was good. I had this thing scheduled where the Black Panther Party newspaper was on the streets Saturday morning. "Get your Black Panther Party newspaper!" I wanted it Saturday morning because black folks were off work, and they were in the community shopping, etc. And this was the name of the game. I really had this shit down to a science. And here this man was talking this talk. I said, "No, he's got to go, he's got to go." So, they split. Eldridge was abroad with him, and they split.

AC: Newton, later at Yale in 1971, talking with Erik Erikson, said the Black Panther Party should align with the women's and gay liberation movements.

BS: Yeah, he said that.

AC: What did you think when he said that?

BS: Well, Rodney was in the Black Panther Party. And Huey says, "I am not going to say anything." I say, "He wants to be a full-fledged member. He's gay. Let the man. What's wrong with it?" As long as he is doing the work. If a person is a pig — I don't give a damn what he is: gay, black, blue, green — then that person is a true enemy of us. That's what I was worried about. I didn't pay attention to that. But I didn't know Huey was bisexual until after the party.

AC: What do you think of the misconception that the Black Panthers are socially conservative?

BS: Who said socially conservative?

AC: In "Notes on a Native Son," Cleaver called homosexuality a sickness that was the product of emasculation by white or European society.[6]

BS: Well I don't know about that. Huey Newton was gay and bisexual, as you know. But I didn't find this out until after I was out of the Black Panther Party, because I was never around Huey. I didn't live where Huey lived. I didn't even like Huey to get in the middle of my organizing.

AC: Could you say more about the early history of the Black Panther Party? How you built the organization?

BS: Look, I went across this country in that seven-month period between Dr. King getting killed and Nixon being elected. And at least 30 of these organizations popped up, and I helped them go along. I got those party members who wanted to start something there to go to the colleges, find the left radicals in the college and any black student organization. Get them to get the colleges to invite me to speak. Get them to contact me, and we'll set up the contracts, and boom. I went all over this country to talk. And I would speak, and then I would use the next day for a chapter to organize itself. I gave them a constant theme: You are organizing around programs. You want programs in the community. You will put up a breakfast program. And once you get through that, you want to put up a free medical health clinic. You want sickle-cell anemia testing programs to initiate with. I said, any other programs you can come up with after this, do that. Do that process. The first program was free breakfast for children. Simultaneously, free sickle-cell anemia testing, and on the back of that with the California Association of Black Doctors, we created the first free preventative medical health clinic. A real live

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The Black Panther Party, Malcom X, and the question of revolutionary politics today

An interview with Kathleen Cleaver

Sophia Freeman

On July 25, 2018—after the meeting at a symposium hosted by King's College London, entitled 68 and its Legacies—Sophia Freeman interviewed prominent 1960s & '70s radical Kathleen Cleaver via Skype. In 1967, following a secretarial job with the New York office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Cleaver joined the Black Panther Party, where she became Communications Secretary. What follows is an edited transcript of the interview.

Sophia Freeman: In 1966 you were working for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), before later moving to San Francisco to join the Black Panther Party (BPP). Can you describe your initial politicization in the lead-up to becoming professionally involved in these organizations? What originally drew you to them?

Kathleen Cleaver: Let's get started from the very beginning. When I was born my parents had both been involved with civil rights movements. My mother was in the Southern Negro Youth Congress, and my father worked in Texas to desegregate the all-white primary. The parents that I had, from when I was born in 1945, were already activists. They did not stop being activists when they became my parents, but they did become more academic, more stable. They had friends, and it was the environment of the 60s. I was brought up in an environment of challenges to civil rights, and standing for civil rights, and suing for civil rights—SNCC was born in 1960 and I think I was 15 or 14—when I encountered them. My parents had come to Atlanta for some meeting, and I was on the Spelman campus—and I will never forget, I saw this sign—and that was where it started. I walked right through the same building that SNCC was started in, and four years later I am on their staff.

I was drawn in by the activities of SNCC. Later on, when I was a little older and could read newspapers, I saw, and I was drawn in by the activities of the women students of Georgia in Albany who were arrested because they refused to sit down—it was some transgression of segregation. They were all girls and they were hauled off in a paddy wagon. This particular photograph was in a newspaper where I was living called The Philadelphia Inquirer. I saw these teenagers who were high school girls on the front page of a newspaper, but the thing was that they were singing. And I thought, well what is this? These are girls going off to jail, and they are singing. I got very fascinated, I read about them, and I was totally impressed. They were risking their lives because they were challenging racial segregation in Georgia, which is actually a very dangerous thing to do. So that is what triggered it: I was in high school, and they were in high school; they were girls, and I was a girl; but they were in a paddy wagon, and I was in a dormitory in a boarding school! But I was inspired, and a lot of people were inspired. A whole movement was inspired by that, and they had been inspired by someone else doing something.

SF: What did Marxism mean to you at the time of your early politicization in the 1960s?

KC: We were not particularly concerned with Marxism during the era of nonviolent protest against segregation. This was a movement based on principles of non-aggression, forms of practices called nonviolent protest. Marxism is not a protest discipline. Marxism is an analysis. So the people who were involved in protest could have had different analyses, and I know they did. Some may have been Marxists, some may have been Christians, some may have been teenagers who just wanted to go along. So Marxism did not have anything to do with the sit-ins—transgressions against racial segregation. The principle is called direct action. There was a professor—I think from Tennessee State—who had classes in which he discussed how you disrupt systems, and how you have a protest, etc. So the people who took his class started having nonviolent demonstrations in Nashville, because the lunch counters were segregated. So the idea of a sit-in is at the beginning of that time frame, and in Albany it was something that they ended up being put in jail for.

SF: Would you say that the early '60s civil rights movement was founded on a nonviolent approach?

KC: That is very correct. The organization that I joined was called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). However, by the time I was a member of the group—which was very early, in '66—they said that we are the non-nonviolent, non-coordinated, non-student, non-committee. So the movement had outgrown the discipline and the ideas of the last four years, but they had not changed their name, and they never changed their name.

SF: In a wider sense, one could say that the early '60s Left was characterized by a nonviolent, integrationist approach to discontents. For instance, SNCC had a mixed membership until its white members were later dismissed from the Committee in 1966.

KC: Wait a minute, you are exaggerating. I am not saying that you did not read that, but that is not what happened. What happened is that SNCC had a membership, and it had a leadership, and the leadership was called the Executive Committee. And a vote was taken in a membership meeting that all the members of the Executive Committee had to be black. That does not mean putting white people out of SNCC. That means consolidating all the leaders of the Black Power Movement in SNCC, as black people. The leadership was voted in. The leadership was made up of candidates. So there was already a central committee. The central committee at a staff meeting could have a vote and make changes to the membership of the leadership.

SF: So the whole of the Committee was voted on, by all of the members. . .

KC: The whole of the membership was there by two in the morning. The meeting started around let's say 4 a.m., and it went on to 5 o'clock and 6 o'clock and 7 o'clock and 8 o'clock, and some people were arguing, and some people had left and gone to sleep, etc. So by the time that we had these votes, there was not as many people as there were at the beginning. I was there the whole time. It was the first meeting that I had ever been to, and I was totally captivated by what was going on, so I would not miss a minute.

SF: How would you characterize this change? What did that mean for the Left? What did that mean for SNCC at the time?

KC: You are asserting something that is inaccurate! You say, 'What does that mean for the Left?' SNCC is not, quote unquote, 'the Left.' The Left is a multiracial, multi-regional group of people who are organized for different reasons. That is the Left. In the Left, there is an organization that is Southern, that is Student, and that is very radical and becoming revolutionary called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that lead to the creation of something called the Black Panther Party. That is not the Left. I would never say SNCC is the Left. I would say that SNCC is radical, youth, Black Power organizing. You cannot define radical, youth, Black Power organizing as the Left, as there is a lot of other stuff in the mix. So it is confusing, and it is inaccurate, and you may think that, but I do not think that. I do not associate the Left with the Black Power movement, which was extremely Southern. In the United States there are more people in the Left in New York City, in Seattle, in other places. The Black Power movement had Left support, but the Black Power movement came out of something called the Southern civil rights movement, which is not necessarily synonymous with, quote unquote, 'the Left.'

SF: How would you consider the BPP in relation to the civil rights movement? Or SNCC?

KC: The BPP started in California—I think that is the one that you are referencing—however, before the BPP in California was started, there was an organization created by SNCC in Alabama, in Lowndes County, as a voting rights group called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). Every party at this time had a symbol. The Alabama Republican Party symbol was a white rooster. The LCFO's symbol was a black panther—which is a local animal. They had a slogan that the black panther would eat up the white rooster. This being because in Lowndes County 80 percent of the population is black but most of the black people had never voted, and so this was a party that was representing black voters. This is where the idea of a black panther came from, but the organization that I became part of called itself the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense because it was not connected to the voting rights group, and it was not in Alabama, it was in California, and it did not really have anything much to do with voting.

SF: Would you consider the BPP as an advancement on the civil rights movement?

KC: The civil rights movement was based in the South, which was a challenge to racial segregation, which is very vicious, and basically an overgrowth from slavery. There was a black population in the South that became free that then became segregated, etc. The Left, which includes things that are going on in California, has to do with voting rights; it has to do with communist organizing, all sorts of stuff. The Southern civil rights activity is not really very comprehensive about the Left, and the Left is much bigger. The BPP is not Southern, but it is very focused on black exploitation, on racial discrimination, and things that are exclusively done to black people, even though it is not in the South. It is a different type of organization, more like a liberation struggle against colonialism. It is modelled on the ideas and the activities of the people in the civil rights movement in the South, but the BPP had its own ideas and its own techniques. The civil rights movement took place in states that were based on concepts and laws of segregation, such as Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, the Deep South, Texas and Florida being some of the worst offenders. The BPP was created in California, where they do not have these kinds of laws. It is not about segregation. It is about the ways and manners in which people are actively treated, not about the racial discrimination and segregation in law. So it is two separate types of activities. The black people in California were responding to something different.

SF: What does it mean to use revolutionary violence as a tool for the transformation of society?

KC: It is not an abstract question. What does it mean to who?

SF: For the Left?

KC: I cannot speak for the Left. I'm not on the Left. I was in the BPP. I was in the civil rights movement. I was in the liberation struggle. I can speak for those movements, and it is one of the tools. There is a lot of violence directed against anti-colonial and anti-racist small movements. They tend to get more violence as being targets than as being perpetrators. However, that is the origin of these notions such as 'guerrilla struggle' and 'subterranean' ways of struggling against imperialism, etc. The BPP arose after a lot of that had developed out of South America and in West Africa and in other places. We were, for all purposes, mostly an aboveground legal organization that followed the laws in California. However, the laws in California are not the same as the laws in all of the states. Someone that might want to have a BPP in Oklahoma, or a BPP in North Carolina would have to respond to different laws, so it is a different type of situation. In the state of California, where the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was started in the City of Oakland, the laws concerning weapons being carried openly were laws that affected hunting and fishing. You could not have unlicensed guns. It was essentially better to display them than to have them concealed, as to have them concealed you had to have a special kind of license. Those were the laws that were on the books, and the way that the Black Panther Party applied those laws was very startling to the city of Oakland. The Black Panthers, as black men, some of whom had beards, wearing berets, black leather jackets, black pants, and carrying guns, and going to the state capital in a group, made a statement on the law. But it was not illegal. Revolutionary violence is a tactic that would be adopted under certain circumstances, very, very specific to certain movements. Let's say that it is the Vietnamese who are wanting to undermine and destroy French Colonialism. They would use revolutionary violence in lots of ways until the point that they gather an army that could actually take on and defeat the French Army.

SF: What would it mean to be tactically divided—for the Left—along racial lines?

KC: When you say 'for the Left,' it has to have a geography. The Left where? The Left in Vietnam? The Left in France?

SF: In America?

KC: America is too huge. California has its own culture; Arizona has a different culture; Chicago has a culture completely 100 percent separate from everybody else. New York has another place. There are state laws concerning prisons, there are state laws concerning carrying weapons. In New York there are eight or nine different political parties.

SF: I mean for the strategy of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s?

KC: What is a strategy? A strategy of what? The social, physical and economic context, and political reality in the United States at the time the BPP was created—in 1966—was that black people were separated, tactically divided, segregated, set apart, etc. Legally in some places, and socially in others. For instance, Los Angeles does not have legal segregation, but it has black neighborhoods, white neighborhoods, white police, you know, so it functions in a manner of racial discrimination. It is just not legally segregated. So that is the social reality in which the people who were members of the BPP joined the organization, made the rules, and did their work. That is the social practice of racial discrimination that the organization that was called The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was built within, and built to challenge. And that is a little bit different than what you are asking me about. I am trying to find out, who is the quote unquote: the Left? Are they people within the United States? Are they people who are within the Socialist Party, are they people in England? I mean that the Left is too vague to be able to answer a complex question of strategy or tactics, or philosophy! I would not say that I am in the Left. I would say that I was in a revolutionary movement, I was in a revolutionary struggle, I am a human rights activist, but I would not choose to identify myself as the Left only because I see something else that is more significant to me. Other people can consider me on the left, and I would accept that because of what they mean by the Left. Period. I would call myself a human rights activist, a revolutionary artist, or whatever, but I would not use 'leftist.' To me, 'left' is very vague. We were in a movement that we called a black liberation movement. We identified ourselves as revolutionaries, and we read texts written by revolutionaries, and we looked at social revolutions around the world for a model for what we were doing.

SF: What was the aim of revolution?

KC: The aim of the revolution is social change, fundamental, permanent elimination of some types of discrimination and separation based on race, based on class, based on gender. It is fundamentally social justice, through methods which will change the social, political, and economic reality of the people who are choosing to participate in the revolution. The example we had was what happened when Algeria—which used to be in the imperial empire of France—liberated itself, and separated itself, and became its own country. That is our idea of revolution as separate and changed from the previous condition of subjugation to and by another power. That is the world that we were growing up in. That was what was happening in many cities and many places. There were revolutions. We were modelling what we thought on what we saw.

SF: What did socialism and communism mean for the BPP in the 1960s?

KC: They were references and quotes from the Red Book—that were considered quite significant. I think that it was overdone, and many people agreed with that, but the BPP started out after Bobby Seale and Huey Newton read Mao Zedong's Red Book.

SF: How did the Black Panther Party understand the socialist and communist critiques in Mao Zedong's Red Book?

KC: My work was in communication, so what I was doing, insofar as what is in the Red Book and in the world of anti-capitalist organizing—was communication: setting up events, programs, places where people would hear contrary analysis, hear critiques, be able to form organizations, and participate in activities that challenged injustice, all the things in the Ten-Point platform of the BPP: we want power to determine justice, we want our own elimination of economic injustices, etc. There was a litany of complaints that African Americans had about their discrimination, that they have had for the last century, and the Black Panther Party condensed this into ten points, and that was its organizing platform.

SF: How did official communism—as in post-Stalinist Russia**[1]** and the official existing communist parties at the time—affect the self-conception of the Black Panthers in the 60s?

KC: The BPP was aware of the communist views, it was aware of the revolution and Mao Zedong. It was much more inclined to be reading Mao Zedong than any other communist—but they recommended a series of books, including works by Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Karl Marx, and so there was an effort to educate comrades in a broader concept of ideology critique. But it was not a party committed to the ideology of communism. It had a ten-point platform, and the first point was that we want the power to determine the destiny of our own community. So in our structure, it would be called a liberation movement for people who are structurally enclosed in a form of colonialism. So that is not necessarily what Marxism provides, you know, a way out of colonialism.

SF: How did you consider Malcolm X in relation to the BPP?

KC: Malcolm X was the inspiration of the BPP. He set it in motion. First of all, Malcolm X was in existence before there was any BPP. Bobby Seale pointed out: "Well, if Malcolm X hadn't gotten killed, Bobby Seale may never have started the Black Panther Party." He was very much an advocate and adherent of Malcolm X's activities, and his follower. I do not know if he had actually joined a mosque. Eldridge Cleaver was in a mosque in prison, and he was a minister of the San Quentin mosque under Malcolm X. So Malcolm X directly influenced the people who made the BPP an organization.

SF: Was there anything inspiring or influential in terms of his thinking and writing and speaking for yourself?

KC: There is absolutely no person who had a bigger influence and inspiration in my generation at all. He talked about Africa; he talked about blackness; he talked about how you think; he talked about the reality. He was very, very plain-spoken, and he never bit his tongue, and he made you understand things. The people who were not as enthusiastic were terrified by him. He did not live long enough for those kind of questions to have a good answer.

SF: What was particularly captivating about the stakes he was making?

KC: He was very outspoken, very clear, and very direct. In one of his statements, he said, essentially asserting that black people came from Africa, "Where else did you come from?!", breaking down the efforts to stereotype black people, to make them feel inferior, etc. I mean he was a captivating orator. So people listened to what he said. They listened to him on the radio; they listened to his records; they listened to his speeches, so perhaps the combination of the delivery, the clarity, and the time. There was no one else like it. He was it. He was that voice, and then he was murdered.

SF: What did he mean by saying that black people are from Africa?

KC: It is an enlightenment. To enlighten black people. That whether you know it or not, your ancestors are African. You are an African. He is trying to assert the reality of a black identity. This is where he was trying to get to. And he was confronting a problem, which we referred to at that time as being brainwashed. People who were living in America, who clearly had African ancestry, were brainwashed into thinking that was not true or something to that effect. So he was waking people—he said they were asleep—trying to get them to recognize their history, to recognize who they were, recognize what was going on in reality.

SF: What does that mean for a revolutionary organization like the Black Panthers?

KC: Bobby Seale said that if Malcolm X had not been killed he probably would not have started the BPP. Malcolm X articulated the principles on which the BPP was organized. These principles Bobby Seale and Huey Newton wrote into their program and platform, which was based very similarly on the Nation of Islam, which during Malcolm's time, had been made more secular. Eldridge Cleaver came out of the Nation of Islam directly into the leadership of the BPP. Other Panthers did also, so there is a fundamental connection between what Malcolm X said, how he changed the way in which black people were thinking of themselves and thinking of their political place in the world, and what they could do in their own self-reliance. And all those kinds of ideas flowed into the minds of those who started the BPP, and also into the way the Panther Party was conceptualized.

SF: How did these principles that were coming from Malcolm X have meaning for politics?

KC: The basic fundamental principle that we gained was of a concept of black nationalism, that all the black people form a community, and that community is connected to Africa, and that community has a language, and it has a history, and it is being subverted by the subjugation of slavery, by poverty, etc. It was very clear, very simplistic. He said, "You say you don't know nothing about Africa. Africa is where you came from!" This is supposed to be a revelation. Malcolm X was a person who had come to an understanding of history and subjugation of black people through reading in prison, through reading the bible. He interpreted it through

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the lens of the Nation of Islam once he got into that movement. But it was like a wakeup call when you are listening to his speeches. It is like he is talking to people on a first-person level, having to tell black people they are black because their ancestry is African, and this is a revelation. His most powerful analysis was when he was linking Africans to African Americans. And he travelled to Africa, he travelled in Ghana. He was trying to link up the African liberation and the black freedom movements himself, which is the last thing that the United States government wanted to happen. And I have seen that in a state department government document.

SF: What is the task of revolutionary politics today?

KC: I think that there are so many tasks that I would not be the one to ask. I mean it depends on which arena of the society your effort to revolutionize is directed to. At this point, there is an enormous amount of energy towards food, security, land, access, being able to protect the soil, etc. That is something very active that was not even on the radar when I was in the revolutionary movements. I have a very different perspective on what is important in life for me right now than I did when I was 18 or 19, with the social justice matters and the challenges to racial, sexual domination and the way that black men were getting shot and killed. That was one of the triggers to the rise of the BPP, when the leader was shot and left for dead. But he survived, and the policeman that he had a shootout with actually died. It was that kind of life-and-death context of challenging racism that the BPP came into being and that is actually a context that does not seem to disappear. It maybe can change, but it is still a context in the U.S.

SF: Has the need for revolutionary politics changed?

KC: Everything changes, that does not mean that it is not necessary. It means that it might be necessary for different reasons. You solve one problem, and you discover more! There are some other things here that we had not straightened out before. Segregation, the legal imposition, is over with. You cannot do it. However, it can be done without being part of the law. It can be done economically. It can be done with rotten neighborhoods and poor schools. The various forms of discrimination that you will discover those with Mexican ancestors have to suffer that you would not even know anything about. The United States social and political structure perpetuates exploitation, and it perpetuates discrimination, but it might not always be the same one at the same time. They have not stopped doing the things they did to black workers. They just do them to Mexicans; they do them to Chinese; they do them to some other kind of immigrant.

SF: There seems to be a lot of activism covered by the mainstream news media, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), March for Our Lives, or #MeToo.

KC: Listen. The BPP was an organization that challenged police brutality. They had offices, they had meetings, they had weapons, and they had programs, etc. I do not see BLM as programs or activities. 'Stop police brutality'; that may be a goal, but what is the way it is being implemented? I mean, I do not see any evidence of it being implemented myself.

SF: What did being a party mean for the BPP?

KC: I will explain. You had meetings. You had assignments. You had a building. You would go to your assignment. I worked as what was called a communications secretary. My assignment was as Press Secretary. I would send out press releases. I would work from my own desk in our apartment for a long time, because I did not know how to drive. Eldridge was Information Minister. He would work in the office. Bobby Seale was the Chairman. We had different assignments, but a lot of what I did was sending out press releases. And then after that, it became making speeches and travelling and being a spokesperson. I worked in the arena of communications. There was aboveground work and underground work, and people coordinating different chapters. So it became a very national and international organization of activists in the Unites States and other countries.

SF: How does that differ from the contemporary Left activism going on?

KC: You tell me that something has major chapters from Asia to the United States? Across California? I do not see any international black activism connected on a social justice ten-point program. It is a model that seems to have not quite disappeared, but a model that has not been resurrected in any way that I can see in the sense of a nation-wide movement, an organization that is based on a set of principles, platforms that they all agree on, political activism domestically and internationally. I just do not see that right now.| **P**

Transcribed by Sophia Freeman

1 Stalin dies in '53; Khrushchev denounces Stalin in '56 and calls for process of de-Stalinization.

"Sealc Interview", cont. from page 1

identify who these politicians are and what kind they are. Are they right-wingers? Idiots? This is what I was teaching the party members in all that seven-month period. My organization grew from 400 members up and down the West Coast to 5,000 members and 49 chapters and branches in the country. 5,000. Half of them were rally-Panthers.

AC: How do you define rally-Panthers?

BS: They mostly just come to the rallies. But you could get work out of them. You could get a little work going here and there. Rally-Panthers had college, or they had jobs. Like Big Man Elbert Howard: He was not able to come to the office every day when we were first organizing the Black Panther Party. He had a full-time job as a printer. He had a full-time schedule at Merritt College as a writer. He was more than a rally-Panther, because he gave us one of the first shotguns that we had. That shotgun that you see Huey holding, that was the one the Big Man had given us. My personal guns, my hunting rifles, I never put none of them out. I took Bobby Hutton, Huey, and all of them to try to show them about shooting, you know. Standing prone, sitting, how to shoot, man. You guys don't understand. You see, I was proficient with weapons anyway, not only through the party but through the United States Air Force. I was an expert shot.

My father had contracts with the open army base. See, my father was deferred from the draft in World War II, because his leg was like a half-inch shorter, one leg was a half-inch shorter than the other. But he had this carpentry skill. And Kelly Field, Randolph Field, in San Antonio, Texas, they transferred his job during World War II to Oakland Army Base in California here. That's what happened, but we were still in Texas. It was not until World War II was over the next year and a half or so that he sent for me and my mother and family and we all got on a train and wound up getting off at the Berkeley Santa Fe train station. Doesn't exist anymore. So when I first came to California, I settled in Berkeley, California in the government projects. That was where I lived and grew up. So, that's the cycle. It is very different from Huey. Huey was a scammer. That's what he was. People write a lot of lies about me. Elaine Brown and her book, all lies. Never happened. It's just bullshit because these people in effect, Huey too in effect, was working with the FBI and others to dismantle the Black Panther Party. Now, you going to ask me how did this happen?

AC: Meaning, what was the role of the FBI in helping to dismantle the Black Panther Party?

BS: Right, so Huey come out of jail. I was in jail. Remember, I left the party 5,000 strong. Forty-nine chapters and branches plus the National Community to Combat Fascism. In some cases, the chapter and the branch were both Black Panther Party and National Community to Combat Fascism. You see, I left a big organization and they had the first teachings of putting programs up, making sure you started voter registration drives, and/or assessing who the politicians are and seeing whether you were going to support some good politicians, or if we have anybody who can run. That was what I left. They arrested me August 8, 1969. Nixon won his election in 1968. In the first week in December that J. Edgar Hoover announces that the Black Panther Party is a threat to the internal security of America. He was saying it over and over and over. The Black Panther Party is this, the Black Panther Party is that, blah, blah, blah.

They saw us as a threat. We had chairmen, minister of defense, minister of information, minister of education, etc. This makes up a committee. Each chapter and each branch, so I had deputy chairmen, deputy this, deputy that in each chapter and branch. You see what I'm getting at? So that you are consistent and you have a body and you have field marshals who can work on your central body. So each chapter and each branch was to have that central, organizing body. I didn't care for mono-leadership without that body you see? So that you can assess, inform yourselves, etc., know what your organizing methods are, what are you going to be doing. That was the methodology. I structured that in the Black Panther Party, all across the country in each one of those chapters and branches.

Then we found the Watergate tape of Nixon talking to J. Edgar Hoover. "Now, J. Edgar, when are you going to get rid of these damn Black Panthers for me?" It's in the Watergate tape. You can listen to it out at Vanderbilt University.

Now Huey, he wanted to get rid of all of this. All the structure that I had put together. So Huey started breaking down the chapters. I was in jail, 3,000 miles away in Connecticut. In fact, I was in isolation. I cannot even talk to other prisoners. It's said why, because I organized some prisoners in jail. Because they would take all the guys with long hair, the left radicals, and say that you won't shave therefore you have to be isolated. Well, I pulled a strike with the prisoners in the jail. We got up and walked away from the food. And this was the newer jail, so the food was good. Wasn't the food we were arguing about. I was arguing about the fact that you're isolating people from day room privileges, therefore you're violating the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America. So I even organized a free commissary program.

I was in jail. I go through the Greater Chicago Seven conspiracy trial. Eight weeks, two months, beat up in the courtroom, all kind of stuff. Argued with the judge, severed from the trial, and sentenced to four years for contempt of court. I was out on bail for that. I was in jail for Connecticut and there was no bail.

Even though I was in isolation in jail, I got books I wanted through my lawyers: books by Ho Chi Minh, Michael Harrington, etc. I really liked Harrington because he despised state-controlled doctrinaire Socialism.

AC: I was going to ask you if you were familiar with Harold Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*? What did you think about him?

BS: Yeah, I really have not made an assessment on him. I heard about him and I just have not made a real assessment on him. A lot of people — I just got tired of listening to them. This is real. I want the real thing. I do not like intellectual posturing. As I said before, our ideology is: "Greater community control of everything." If we do not have greater community control via the political system, then we are not going to have any real liberation. That is hard to do, but that is what we have to do. That is what I believe. I do not like sitting around and dissertating this and that. I am tired of that, I have heard that over and over. I teach dialectics.

AC: What is your conception of dialectics from?

BS: Hegel. It's Hegel. Not that I have read a lot of Hegel, but I've picked up on this. I have a book called *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (Stalin, 1938). And so everybody is talking down on materialism but somebody started writing about some of the basic aspects of dialectics. So I said, "Okay, dialectics: Matter is always in motion and constantly changing." And then it said, "A quantitative increase or quantitative decrease causes a qualitative leap or change." I said, "Ah." Now that really got my attention. Now I understand the other principles, but I said, "Wow, I want to organize something." I don't want to sit here deliberating forever. I don't need all of that. | **P**

Transcribed by Audrey Crescenti, William Lushbough, Efraim Carlebach, Austin Carder and Kevin Dong.

1 Huey Newton, "A Prison Interview," in *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 223-40, <https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/Huey-Newton-A-Prison-Interview.pdf>.
2 "Kwame Nkrumah," *Wikipedia*, last modified December 18, 2018, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kwame_Nkrumah>."The construction of a dam on the Volta River (launched in 1961) provided water for irrigation and hydro-electric power, which produced enough electricity for the towns and for a new aluminum plant." Kwame Nkrumah was the first prime minister and president of Ghana.
3 "7-skill level" is a classification from the nine-character Military Occupational Speciality (MOS) code used in the U.S. Air Force at the time. "Air Force Specialty Code," *Wikipedia*, last modified January 15, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Force_Specialty_Code>.
4 Malcolm X, "I Don't Mean Bananas," in *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 207-222, <https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/Malcolm-X-_I-Don_t-Mean-Bananas_.pdf>.
5 The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was a Marxist-Leninist organization founded in 1969, which broke up over internal ideological disputes in 1971. "League of Revolutionary Black Workers," *Wikipedia*, last modified January 13, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/League_of_Revolutionary_Black_Workers>.
6 Eldridge Cleaver, "Notes on a Native Son," in *Soul on Ice* (New York: Random House, 1999), p.122-137.

"Vanguard or Avant-Garde", cont. from page 2

sexuality, and religious identification, or more concretely, white supremacy, cultural imperialism, settler-colonialism, and empire. Oppressions outside exploitation are undoubtedly altered with the abolition of class, but it seems equally true that some or another form of systemic violence, cultural imperialism, marginalization, or powerlessness could emerge after the destruction of capitalist modes of social order.[51]

Acting on this view, various social movements since the first half of the twentieth-century have splintered off from the primacy of class. Today, in the current popular framework and even in the telling of mainstream history, explicit class political projects are largely relegated to the 'labor movement.' Identity-based movements—civil rights, women's, and LGBTQ movements to list a few—serve a much more prominent role in the public imagination.[52] Robin D.G. Kelley, in surveying twentieth-century Black liberation movements, reports on the trend among Socialist organizations to subordinate Black freedom to the class struggle. Critical Black Socialist thinkers grew tired of Socialist parties downplaying the significance of what they called 'the Negro Question.' "The European working class," they charged, "had too often joined forces with the European bourgeoisie in support of racism, imperialism, and colonialism."[53]

Black intellectuals, and socialist proponents, such as Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, and Paul Robeson, challenged the prevailing class orthodoxy within the ranks of Marxist-inspired organizations. They flipped the analysis, arguing that only once white supremacy was dismantled could the class struggle be successfully fought. Therefore, class abolition could not be prior to Black liberation but by necessity must follow the project of dismantling racial marginalization. In the wake of mass disillusionment with the civil rights movement to "achieve all its goals and to deal with urban poverty,"[54] criticisms of 'class reductionism' took stronger hold. The rise of the Black Panther Party (self-described as the vanguard of the revolution), along with successes by Third World liberation movements, cemented positions against viewing the proletariat as the revolutionary vanguard. For Black revolutionaries at the time, "the uprisings of the colonized might point the way forward"[55] for a more robust international revolutionary project.

"[Third World liberation] movements…were independent of both the white Left and the mainstream civil rights movement" explains Robin D.G. Kelley. "Directing much of their attention to working-class struggles, urban poverty and racism, and police brutality…a vision of global class revolution led by oppressed people of color"[56] took shape. However, these liberation movements proved limited as well, and in the U.S. Black Power groups like the Black Panther Party "were so concerned with self-defense…that they devoted little time and energy to the most fundamental question of all: what kind of world they wanted to build if they did win."[57]

The weakness of political imagination points to the need for embracing the radical imagination, along with placing open utopia as a foundation for contemporary movements. Black Power offered instances of vision and imagination, but ultimately these groups became encumbered in a fight for gaining political inches. Had they committed to sketching the world they wanted to live in, perhaps this period of radicalism would have endured. Under the weight of a massive assault by the FBI (known as its COINTELPRO program), the bulk of a once powerful Black Socialist movement was effectively destroyed. [58]

Contemporary thinkers, such as Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, have issued a clarion call for resurrecting Black Socialist politics. Yamahtta Taylor has also expressed the need to stop framing class and identity as dualistic political projects.The foibles of the [Communist Party] should not be conflated with the validity of anti-capitalism and Socialism as political theories that inform and guide the struggle for Black liberation…Far from being marginal to the struggles of Black people, Socialists have *always* been at the center of those movements—from the struggle to save the Scottsboro Boys in the 1930s, to Bayard Rustin's role in organizing the 1963 March on Washington, to the Black Panther Party's organizing against police brutality. [59]Open possibilities exist for weaving together a class and identity vanguard project. Offering a way forward, Aimé Césaire wrote "I am not going to entomb myself in some strait particularism. But I don't intend either to become lost in a fleshless universalism…I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all."[60] | **P**

1 'Open Utopia' is a concept I attempted to develop elsewhere. Rather than a utopia that operates as a 'blueprint' or preoccupies itself with prefiguring the revolution today at the expense of far-sighted strategic end goals I posed that utopia should neither be prescriptive nor entirely abandon its prefigurative aspirations, but recognize its features will require constant revision, addition, and redirection where broad principles decided on a democratic basis offer a guiding framework for an 'open utopia.' Riccio 2017.
2 Howard Zinn perhaps captures the demands of OWS best in a speech before his death, "What, are you a dreamer?' And the answer is, yes, we're dreamers. We want it all.' Zinn 2012, p. 258.
3 I refer to the notion of 'common sense' made coherent by Antonio Gramsci, who viewed the project of cultural hegemony as one which imposed its own set of accepted values and norms accepted by the population at large, cementing its power.
4 Dean 2012, p. 210.
5 Jaffe 2013, p. 201.
6 Taylor 2016, p. 168.
7 Taylor 2016 p. 161.
8 Taylor 2016, p. 162.
9 Taylor 2016, p. 158.
10 'Black politics' is defined by Lester K. Spence as a substitute for generic terms like 'racial politics.' Black politics refers to 'the ways different black populations compete over scarce resources, over time, over money, over votes, over public policy, over agenda items, over care, and other resources that have a significant impact on how black communities and the people within them are structured.' Spence 2015, p. 7.
11 Reed Jr. 2016.
12 Namely he refers to Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometti, Alicia Garza, and DeRay Mckesson.
13 Reed Jr. 2016.
14 Dixon 2015.
15 Ibid.
16 Fraser 1997, pp. 11-40.
17 Smith 2012, pp. 285-294.
18 Smith specifically refers to the strategic conflicts within women of color communities, but I find her argument to remain equally true when one considers the claims of class-bound political adherents that exploitation is the lynchpin source of all oppression.
19 Childs 1989, p. 3.
20 Most often this conception is attributed to Lenin and his most fervent admirers—the debate over whether Lenin himself was an opportunist, latent dictator, or bottom-up revolutionary is exhaustive. Engaging in this debate risks derailing my purpose here, so I will only make mention of these different positions in passing without taking a firm stance either way, which is genuinely beside the point.
21 Cornell 2016, pp. 113-124.
22 According to journalist Ronald Radosh, Bannon in conversation confessed to being a Leninist since Lenin wanted 'to destroy the state, and that's [his] goal too' (*The Daily Beast* 2016).
23 Inspired in large part by John Holloway's body of work, I have argued that capitalism should be understood as an 'open totality' where there are 'cracks' and 'ruptures' in the social order that pose as potential sites for revolutionary strategy.
24 Graeber 2007, p. 306.
25 Graeber 2007, p. 307.
26 Graeber 2007, p. 304.
27 Shandro 2016, p. 440.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 A world order, according to Lenin, owing to capitalism's logical development into an imperialist system of globalized exploitation.
32 Shandro 2016, p. 442.
33 Dean 2012, p. 241.
34 Shandro 2016, p. 443.
35 Anarchists also made this charge against Lenin's vanguard party, finding a particularly clear expression in the essay popularized by Murray Bookchin, *Listen Marxists!*
36 Shandro 2016, p. 444.
37 Shandro 2016, p. 445.
38 Shandro 2016, p. 444.
39 I am not suggesting that this is the attitude of Biko, but merely noting the predominance of holding a view that one is somehow more enlightened than the masses, and therefore must show them the light of knowledge.
40 Kelley 2002, p. 8.
41 Childs 1989, p. 3.
42 Kelley 2002, p. 8.
43 Childs 1989, p. 4.
44 Childs' assertion that vanguards take on either a materialist or idealist approach can be approximated onto my distinction between the authoritarian (materialist) and elitist (idealist) tendencies within vanguardism.
45 Bourdieu 1986.
46 Bourdieu identifies four forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. The volume plus configuration of these capital forms, along with one's social trajectory, determine one's class position.
47 Dean 2016, p. 253.
48 I've argued in a separate piece that the social world, referencing Bourdieu, is a mass accumulation of history where movement (where the movement of capitalist dispossession or resistance activities) is a constant driving factor which creates 'cracks' and 'ruptures' in the organization of capitalism.
49 Lerner 1986, p. 8.
50 Lerner 1986, p. 5.
51 Iris Marion Young has proposed the above as the five forms oppression takes in contemporary society, in her seminal essay 'Five Faces of Oppression' easily accessible online.
52 I do not wish to imply that 'class' or 'identity' politics operate in separate silos—although sometimes that is unfortunately true. Rather, I find it common to encounter any and all associations of contemporary class politics to be confined to something that labor unions do (as though unions aren't the collective accumulation of diverse worker identities), and also often coded as a white person phenomenon.
53 Kelley 2002, p. 178.
54 Kelley 2002, p. 62.
55 Kelley 2002, p. 178.
56 Kelley 2002, p. 62.
57 Kelley 2002, p. 108.
58 COINTELPRO also placed the anti-war Left and Socialist groups in its cross-hairs. One would be wise to remember that state and private sector violence is always available as a technique to crush resistance movements—regardless of their commitment to non-violence.
59 Taylor 2016, pp. 204-205.
60 Quoted in Kelley 2002, p. 179.

Vanguard or Avant-Garde? Revisiting questions on leadership

Part 1: The vanguard debate in history

Alexander Riccio

This is the first of a two-part article written by Alexander Riccio. The second part, "Towards a new vanguard theory," will appear in PR #114 in March, 2019.

VANGUARDISM IS ALIVE AND WELL in the 21st century, yet it rarely gets named as such. One hears often of the need to 'center' particular forms of leadership; the leadership of the working-class, or Indigenous people, or Black people for instance. Centering at times refers to placing a particular object of struggle at the forefront of all issues, as in calls to consider climate catastrophe the primary concern for the Left, or the crises of reproduction as the major issue which folds every other into its purview. Ironically, despite such vanguardism, it is also popular on the Left to hear calls for no leaders, for horizontality, for anti-vanguardism.

Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter have brought these paradoxes to the surface, and it appears to me that partly explaining the Left's inability to firmly dislodge vanguardism is due to a lack of theoretical knowledge and to the fact that historical vanguardist projects possess a number of valuable insights. Yet, it abundantly evident that the majority of leftists today only recall or know of its worst features (namely its elitist and authoritarian track record), and misrecognize them as the sole features of vanguardism.

Reducing vanguardist theory squarely as a top-down repressive political form does little to help us make sense of current calls for particular models of leadership. These calls build upon a foundation of political debate rendered incomplete without a full engagement with the theory and history of vanguardist thought. Additionally, ignoring this history allows for some of the least productive aspects of vanguardism to seep into movement spaces without sufficient contestation. For anyone desiring a better world, it is necessary to take seriously the need for political clarity on just what vanguardism has been, how it's developed, and where we can recognize its dimensions today. Otherwise, the current bewilderment over 'who will lead' and 'who should follow' will continue to fragment social movement energies and focus.

I will attempt to pull from the best of vanguardist ideas and dispense with their less attractive features, fully recognizing that too often such polemics have produced elitist and authoritarian qualities. Though many on the Left today shun vanguardism as a matter of theoretical principle, vanguardist practices are still all too common, and the common rhetoric of 'leaderful' movements effectively veils this reality. My aim is not to suggest the Left adopt one particular organizational form over all others (the party; the autonomous zone; and so on), or to claim the Left needs to embrace vanguardism. On the contrary, the numerous criticisms of vanguardism are valid and should be considered. What I strive to put forward is a more coherent and reformulated conception of the vanguard that is neither authoritarian or elitist, so that if a vanguard takes hold it does not commit the same errors made by historical vanguardist groups (i.e. the Bolsheviks, Black Panther Party, etc.).

Constructing this conception of a vanguard requires an analysis which recognizes the following: 1) leadership and oppression are dialectically shaped; 2) the vanguard should not strictly lead the revolution or act as a lone party force, but work as a frontal assault against capitalist power; 3) capitalism profits through dispossession, making it a force in movement without a permanent spatial or temporal center; and 4) since capitalism has no permanent center there will not be a singular vanguard frontal assault, but a multitude of assaults led by the plural vanguards. I conclude that today's vanguards act as a force of movement(s) propelled by the sharing of stories which generate empathy and/or solidarity amongst disparate groups, and articulate a collective desire for an open utopia[1] where alienation is no longer an oppressive feature of society. Vanguardism, like much revolutionary political theory, is largely an attempt to craft a story about how we can bring about a new world; hence an open utopia. Seeing as the revolution has yet to come, the story needs another chapter.

Quick notes on the current debate

The efficacy of OWS's and Black Lives Matter's amorphous 'leaderless' structures have been called into question. For OWS, its supposed lack of demands and disavowal of official leaders has been faulted for its decline. Where the former is truly a hollow claim,[2] the latter has gained a certain 'common sense'[3] amongst Left intellectuals today. "The ideas of autonomy, horizontality, and leaderlessness that most galvanized people at the movement's outset," writes Jodi Dean, "came later to be faulted for conflicts and disillusionment within the movement." Dean highlights how "assertions of leaderlessness as a principle incited a kind of paranoia around leaders who emerged but who could not be acknowledged or held accountable as leaders."[4] A proposed solution has been found in calls to rebuild a vanguard party, rectifying problems of accountability. Dean argues that OWS was led by an unacknowledged vanguard—a disciplined, invisible cadre of organizers that did the bulk of work and held the early movement intact. Admits OWS organizer Sarah Jaffe, "the 'leaderless' structure of Occupy masked the fact that a small core group of people did a large amount of the work."[5] However, as demonstrated below, the real argument is not about having a leaderless/leaderful organization or a party, but about which category of people are expected to be at the forefront of a revolutionary strategy.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) participants frequently cite the need to center the voices of its Black leaders (particularly Black women leaders). According to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, BLM is "led by women… decentralized and is largely organizing the movement through social media."[6] Yet BLM is still criticized for its lack of identifiable leaders. Yamahtta Taylor explains much of this stems from a "division between the 'old guard' and the 'new generation.'"[7] Young or first-time activists within BLM "bring new ideas, new perspectives, and often, new vitality to the patterns and rhythms of activism."[8] The old guard, or 'the civil rights establishment,'[9] is represented by the likes of Reverend Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, and leaders of the NAACP. They view the rise in political activity amongst young Blacks as opportunities for increasing Democrat voter turnout, in turn strengthening their own 'political value.'

Fractures between the 'old guard' and 'new generation' reveal intra group divisions within Black politics.[10] Identifying the interests of an 'old guard' requires locating their class positions and political allegiances. Adolph Reed Jr. notes "the record of the black political regime [aka the old guard] consolidated in the late 1960s and early 1970s is most markedly class-skewed and amounts to at best a sort-of racial trickle down."[11]

Reed Jr. argues the 'old guard' acts in concert with neoliberal objectives, but he doubts the 'new generation' will break from this tradition. BLM's anointed spokespersons,[12] for Reed Jr., reflect basic liberal positions which are inadequate for contesting today's capitalist hegemony. "Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors," he says, "understand advancing a political cause as identical with advancing an individual brand."[13] Bruce A. Dixon shares Reed Jr.'s skepticism, asking "to whom are #BlackLivesMatter's leaders accountable, and just where are they taking their 'movement?'"[14]

BLM, for Dixon, mirrors the spectacle of Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign promising 'hope' and 'change,' delivering neither. "Maybe movements nowadays are really brands," he opines, "to be evoked and stoked by marketers and creators when needed. But it's hard to imagine a brand transferring the power from the wealthy to the poor."[15] Demands for leadership accountability reflect disaffection with BLM's loose horizontals. Again, I contend that the real debate is not on leaderlessness or horizontals, it is on revolutionary strategy. More specifically, it is an extension of vanguard debates today taking form in appeals for either a class-based political movement or an identity-based one.

This debate creates, in my view a false, polarity between class politics and identity politics. Framed by philosopher Nancy Fraser, class programs root their political objectives in redistribution while identity-based programs focus on the 'struggle for recognition' or representation.[16] Attempts are made to locate society's central oppression where focusing energies on contesting this central oppression is perceived as the most expedient strategy for liberation. Such efforts quickly devolve into what has been labeled 'oppression olympics,' which Andrea Smith counters is actually a matter of inadequate analytical frameworks.[17] Posing strategic dilemmas, she explains, different groups put forth the need to dismantle a particular form of oppression (seen as most salient to keep the current social system of capitalism intact) prior to other oppressions. Thus, strategies for liberation can 'run into conflict' with one another.[18]

These positions repurpose certain themes within vanguardist theories. Contained within class versus identity frameworks is the tacit argument that some groups are in a better social position to lead a revolution. Characterized by John Brown Childs, "the Vanguard, holds that there is within society a dominant center from which all else flows. To make positive basic changes in society, it is necessary to understand and control this center."[19] The back-and-forth between a class or identity politics analytically parallels vanguardist theory. A class-based vanguard locates capitalist exploitation as society's central inner logic, whereas an identity-based vanguard may view racial and ethnic oppression as the center. I will take up the argument again below; however, at this juncture it is appropriate to examine the social history of vanguardism in order to understand how we came to this contemporary debate.

An open reading on the history of vanguardism

Discomfort with vanguards stem from their common association with elite and top-down leadership.[20] Yet an open reading of vanguard history proves instructive for today's revolutionaries as it highlights differing inflections beyond the pejorative 'vanguard.' Clear distinctions exist between vanguardism espoused by 1930s anarchists (labeling themselves The Vanguard Group) chronicled by historian Andrew Cornell[21] and the self-identification with Leninist vanguardism made by Donald Trump's fascistic chief strategist Stephen Bannon.[22] An open social history discovers the cracks[23] within vanguard theory and practice. It cultivates a conception of leadership which does not dominate, but provokes awareness and creates entry points (or cracks) for inexperienced activists to enter mass movements.

In his short survey on vanguards, David Graeber contends that modern social theory (generated by Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte) was born in tandem with notions of vanguardism. Explains Graeber, "Saint-Simon was writing in the wake of the French Revolution and, essentially, was asking what went wrong…How can we do it right?" As a corrective to revolutionary failure, Saint-Simon sketched a vision of future society where "artists would hatch the ideas which they would then pass on to the scientists and industrialists to put into effect."[24] Strict leadership was not a feature of Saint-Simon's vanguard. Instead, it was led by visionary artists who donned a particular role in world-making. This is the basis for the avant-garde inflection within broader vanguardist theory.

Auguste Comte, conversely, viewed sociology as a discipline capable of improving society through "the regulation and control of almost all aspects of human life according to scientific principles."[25] Graeber contends these positions were eventually reversed, as the Left shifted its self-image to scientists improving society (science being in the form of a Marxian social science), while the Right saw itself as artists mapping out a vision for a new society (as Hitler and Mussolini imagined themselves doing through their respective fascist projects).

Vanguards viewing themselves as scientists, Graeber poses, align with Marxist groups interested in "a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy." The avant-garde aligns more with political anarchism which "has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice."[26] Graeber helps begin to sketch out the contours of vanguardism's two inflections: an authoritarian approach regulated by 'science,' and an artistic (although we'll discover elitist) approach guided by optimism in creativity as a vehicle for revolutionary energies. Popular discourse conflates vanguardism as necessarily its authoritarian variant, whereas its artistic thread is commonly known as an avant-garde when it is not being forgotten entirely.

Adding more context, Alan Shandro charts vanguardism's history beginning with the argument made popular by Marx and Engels that revolution should root itself in a working-class movement. Working-class movements could achieve success, claimed Marx and Engels, with leadership provided by the Communist party. Due to their proximity to capital production, the Communist party grasps the significance of material conditions. Informed by this awareness, the party can guide the working-class masses with sound strategy for toppling bourgeois rule. Within the Communist party, argued Marx and Engels, exists a potential "connection between theory and practice in the leadership of the working-class movement."[27] Shandro cautions against interpreting this argument as "an oracular vision" where "the vanguard plays the role of prophet." Instead, "the formulation is perhaps more reasonably read as an appreciation that placating the bourgeoisie could never advance the workers' struggle." Therefore, the vanguard would be responsible for establishing "principles of solidarity on a class foundation and dispelling the illusion of supra-class solidarity."[28] The bourgeoisie, in short, is constituted by fundamentally opposing interests than those of the proletariat.

A degree of malleability is present in Marx's and Engels' construct of a vanguard, opening possibilities for avoiding elitist or authoritarian characteristics. Orthodox views on the vanguard, explains Shandro, appear after Marx's death. In particular, the work of Karl Kautsky promotes the need for enlightened vanguard leadership. An economic determinist, Kautsky posed that since "capitalist production transforms particular struggles into a universal one" the party in capitalism's most advanced territorial sector is positioned to acquire consciousness able to perceive "the universal interest of the whole working class."[29] The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) became Kautsky's vanguard, who "as a result of their consciousness…transcend their particular circumstances." Unsurprisingly, the SPD were "skilled, urban, Protestant, German, male" workers, and since "Socialist consciousness donned the particular lenses of the advanced workers," the SPD's universalism conformed to Eurocentric views on capitalist development.[30]

The working-class and party are further distinguished from each other in Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* and *The State and Revolution*. A working-class movement threatened bourgeois dominance, but to overthrow the existing world order[31] a revolutionary vanguard party "distinct from the spontaneous working-class movement" was needed. To defeat the bourgeoisie, coordinated strategies and discipline are essential. "Shifting circumstances demand that the vanguard readjust theory and adapt practice to account for the shifting terrain of battle."[32] Lenin understood capitalism as a plastic system, the ruling class can maneuver around working-class confrontations. Working-class spontaneity could be fractured, atomized, and ultimately crushed. Revolutionary strategy, therefore, is necessarily complex and must be adaptable to account for capitalism's disorienting counter-assaults. "Discipline and preparation," explains Jodi Dean, "enable the party to adapt to circumstances rather than be completely molded or determined by them."[33]

Lenin's distinction between class and party was seen by opponents as "providing a rationale for the subordination of workers to the authority of revolutionary intellectuals."[34] Figures such as Leon Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg noted the easy slide from Lenin's vanguard party into a dictatorship, supplanting the organic struggles of the working-class.[35]

Today as a term, 'vanguardism' more often refers to sectarian habits amongst the Left. This usage, Shandro suggests, became popular during the 1960s in reference to Maoist and Trotskyite organizations. This conception "insinuated that sect-like narcissism was implicit in the very notion of a vanguard party," affirming objections toward any Leninist vanguard. In contrast, "the term 'avant-garde' has been applied to cutting-edge artists or works of art that take a critical stance vis-à-vis the conformism of mainstream art and culture."[36] The avant-garde is seen as capable of provoking the sleeping masses, but does not lead them. An avant-garde "acts out its critically innovative character not really as leadership at all but as a kind of internal exile from the stifling conformism of capitalist society."[37] Yet a distinction remains between the masses and so-called non-conformist critical thinkers comprising the avant-garde.

Vanguard theories are indeed more rich and flexible than commonly held, with potential to be shaped into non-elite and anti-authoritarian concepts. Shandro points to an inference on the vanguard in the *Communist Manifesto* (Russian edition, 1882). In it, Marx and Engels suggest the character of a vanguard would change if Russia proved to be the battle ground for a proletarian revolution. Such adaptability "denotes [a vanguard as] the first clash of forces, which gives signal for a wider revolutionary explosion." Instead of oracular foresight, a vanguard is shaped by mass events which provoke revolutionary uprisings. Since an avant-garde instigates non-conformism, a vanguard posed as the first clash of forces can encourage the "fusion of artistic provocation and political commitment."[38] Merging vanguard and avant-garde inflections, in turn, evinces the form of a radical imagination capable of mapping an open utopia.

Who possesses the correct consciousness?

The basis for an anti-authoritarian conception of a vanguard has been established, but other dilemmas in vanguardism remain. A vanguard can be defined as the frontal assault on power initiating proletarian insurgence against the ruling class. Historically, though, vanguardist thought has also been fueled by frustration with prevailing passivity (or apathy) amongst the masses. Accounting for this, vanguards pose that the masses have internalized their oppression. Marx called this 'false consciousness,' enabling class to exist simply in itself instead of for itself. Until the proletariat collectively recognize the source of their domination, they will continue to be a marginal class.

Put by anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, "the greatest weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." Yet in recognizing the need to raise consciousness, vanguards have often accepted their exclusive ability to access a consciousness perceived as inaccessible to the masses. The oppressed, for these vanguards, have a collective mind.[39] Robin D.G. Kelley writes of this trend within the academy, where "students argue that the problems facing 'real people' today can be solved by merely bridging the gap between our superior knowledge and people outside the ivy walls who simply do not have access to that knowledge."[40] For vanguards "the people are seen as totally vulnerable. They have no sense of their past, no understanding of the present, and no vision of the future."[41] D.G. Kelley argues vanguards do not actually instill consciousness onto the masses. Rather, "social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions"[42] so that collective action raises individual consciousness, not the other way around. I will return to this point later.

Characterized by John Brown Childs, vanguard elitism flows directly from the view of possessing privileged awareness the masses do not. Vanguards "accept the idea of a dominant center in society,"[43] which corresponds to their preconceptions on society's ills and needed medicine. The center is either materialist or idealist, where materialists "seek to control economic power and the structures of science and technology" while idealists "seek to control society's culture—its philosophy, art, and literature."[44]

Who can lead the revolution?

Vanguard theory, in viewing society as having a dominant center, has preoccupied its analysis with locating the best positioned group to lead a revolution. Corresponding to strategic camp's materialist philosophy and prefigurative camp's idealist philosophy, the vanguard's analysis on society's center flows into arguments over which social subject is closest to power structures. Propelling this analysis is the vanguard's desire to locate today's revolutionary agent (i.e. the proletariat, the peasants, etc.). Views oscillate on which social subject is most fundamental for reproducing power, but whatever the subject they are posed as the necessary leader of a frontal assault. Commonly today, in contrast to early vanguard ideas, the argument goes that those most impacted by oppression, by rebelling, are best poised to overturn the status quo. Debates rage over which form of oppression is most salient for maintaining dominant power. The belief that one center is the base of society parallels notions that oppression has a single focal point. In both, elitist attitudes are common, coupled with charges of false consciousness (whether amid the masses or other vanguard groups).

For Marx and Engels, the proletariat (i.e. factory workers) is a revolutionary agent constituted by capitalism's inner logic. Factory workers, they believed, form the backbone of capitalist economies. The organization of work (Marx called this the 'mode of production') generated enough surplus to eliminate material deprivation, and provided a model of social order which could be reproduced on a societal level. In contradictory fashion, capitalist modes of labor discipline the proletariat for efficiency, instilling all the necessary skills and abilities for organizing an egalitarian society. Thus, in a dialectical process, industrial labor sites generate the agents of revolution.

Until recently, I have not understood Marx's and Engels' argument. The experience of work, primarily in restaurants, seemed only to train me for obedience; passivity rather than rebellion a typical outcome among service workers. But over the years as I've engaged in activism, the idea that work instills revolutionary discipline became less quixotic. During protest actions, for example, quick decision-making is a valuable skill as no amount of premeditation can prepare participants for inevitable changes in scenarios on the ground. Further, the needed planning and strategizing prior to any protest action requires a high degree of self-initiative among organizers. Restaurant work is intrinsically rapid, demanding one to be quick (both mentally and physically), alert, and efficient. If one couldn't perform tasks in a snap, they stood little chance of surviving in the industry.

After sixteen years of restaurant work, I gained thousands of hours in practice making quick decisions, generating instant strategies to solve problems, and learning self-initiative. Pierre Bourdieu observed, "the work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement), and effort that presupposes a personal cost…an investment, above all of time."[45] Service work inscribes a certain configuration and level of social and cultural capital, albeit one perceived as considerably less valuable than other configurations of capital.[46] After years of being governed by the mantra 'if you can lean, you can clean,' my ability to adapt to a given scenario began to appear and feel natural, as though innate.

Marx and Engels recognized that nineteenth-century factories in England were structured for efficiency, which instilled worker discipline, and featured the most advanced technologies for capital production. By virtue of their work, the proletariat learns how to wield the machines which could be appropriated for society's needs. With both the practice-based discipline and technological knowledge, the proletariat were in the greatest strategic position to organize themselves and seize capitalism's means of production. Being organized as a class of workers was a condition within capitalism, the proletariat organized as workers needed to transition from this condition into a proletariat organized as a party. Jodi Dean elaborates: "[workers] are already organized as workers in a factory, which enables them to become conscious of their material conditions and the need to combine into unions…the party is necessary because class struggle is not simply economic struggle. It's political struggle."[47] For today's restaurant industry (particularly its fast-food sectors), Marx and Engels would note the technologies workers learn to operate, their discipline toward efficiency, and their awareness of assembly-line organization for dividing labor into manageable tasks. Though privately I hate to admit it, my experience of maximal exploitation for the express benefit of a few has probably facilitated my growth as an organizer in more ways than I likely will ever know.

One must concede, however, that where Marx and Engels thought nineteenth-century factories in England provided a glimpse into how to organize an entire society, this does not hold true for today's restaurants—or any single industry. Call this a problem of scale and complexity. Since the social world is in movement,[48] today's organizational forms cannot be reduced to any single model. Nor is the center of society strictly economic.

Additionally, an emphasis on the primary role of economics intrinsically holds that exploitation is the lynchpin of oppression. Thereby, once class is abolished (and with it exploitation) capitalism is thrown into the dustbin of history and the path toward total liberation is open. Yet, what happens to patriarchy once capitalism is shucked off our collective backs? Will male supremacy end once the class system disappears?

Casting doubt, feminist historian Gerda Lerner argues patriarchy extends as far back as written history. She writes, "the appropriation by men of women's sexual and reproductive capacity occurred *prior* to the formation of private property and class society."[49] The extent of women's subordination to men is difficult to overemphasize. "Women have been systematically excluded from the enterprise of creating symbol systems, philosophies, science, and law,"[50] highlighting a history of systematic exclusion and appropriation on the basis of gender, dating long before the emergence of capitalism.

Similar questions hold on the impact ending capitalism will have for domination linked to race,

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